Mill's *On Liberty*

Chapters II and III

Four Grounds for Free Expression

- At the end of Chapter II (59), Mill *recaps* the "***four*** distinct grounds" for ***freedom of opinion* and *its expression:***
  1. "If any opinion is compelled to silence, that opinion may, for aught we can certainly know, be true. To deny this is to assume our own infallibility." (details: 22-40)
  2. "Though the silenced opinion be an error, it may, and very commonly does, contain a *portion* of the truth; and since the general or prevailing opinion on any subject is rarely or never the whole truth, it is only by the collision of adverse opinions that the *remainder* of the truth has any chance of being supplied." (details: 51-59)

Prevailing opinion:

FALSE

TRUE

  3. "Even if the received opinion be not only true, but the whole truth, unless it is suffered to be, and actually is, vigorously and earnestly *contested*, it will, by most of those who conceive it, be held in the manner of a ***prejudice***, with little comprehension or feeling of its ***rational grounds***." (details: 40-44; *developing capacity for* ***thought***)
  4. "Not only this, but the ***meaning*** of the doctrine itself will be in danger of being lost, or enfeebled, and ***deprived of its vital effect on the character & conduct:*** the dogma becoming a mere formal profession, ***inefficacious*** for good, but cumbering the ground, and preventing the growth of any real and heartfelt conviction, from reason or personal experience." (details: 44-51; *developing capacity for* ***action***)

Grounds 1 and 2

- Mill discusses the first two grounds with great rhetorical brilliance, marshaling impressive and persuasive historical evidence (*mistaken persecution:* Socrates↓, Jesus, Luther).
- In a way, though, this is the *easy* part: *few* people will assert their own infallibility, and once they've admitted their fallibility, the case for open discussion is quite strong because we value **truth** so highly (cf. Milton's *Areopagitica*).
- I think Mill's argument becomes more interesting when he (to use legalese) "argues in the alternative," i.e., when he accepts the truth of prevailing opinion for argument's sake but *still* maintains the value of free expression.
- Mill's discussion of the *next* two grounds indicates that it is not merely *what* we believe that matters but also ***how we believe it*** (*cf. Plato:* ***true opinion*** *v.* ***knowledge***). As he says at the beginning of this subsection, an opinion that goes unchallenged "will be held as a **dead dogma**, not **living truth**" (40).

Grounds 3 and 4

- To hold an opinion as a "dead dogma" or "prejudice" is to be **(3) unaware of its grounds** or **(4) unfazed by its meaning**. Of **(3)**, Mill says:

"If the ***cultivation of the understanding*** consists in one thing more than in another, it is surely in learning the ***grounds*** of one's own opinions. Whatever people believe…they ought to be able to defend against at least the *common objections*…. So essential is this discipline to a real understanding of moral and human subjects, that **if** opponents of all important truths do not exist, it is indispensable to *imagine them*, and supply them with the strongest arguments which the most skillful *devil's advocate* can conjure up." (41, 43)

- Notice Mill's emphasis on the "cultivation" of mental skills, **if necessary** through debates with imaginary opponents. Constant challenge to our opinions is necessary for us to ***grow as thinkers***. Of **(4)**, Mill says:

"The fact, however, is, that not only the *grounds* of the opinion are forgotten in the absence of discussion, but too often the ***meaning*** of the opinion itself. The words which convey it cease to suggest ideas, or suggest only a small portion of those they were originally employed to communicate. Instead of a vivid conception and a *living belief*, there remain only a few phrases retained by *rote*; or, if any part, *the shell and husk only of the meaning is retained, the finer essence being lost*." (45; e.g., religious ritual [reciting Lord's Prayer])

Grounds 3 and 4, cont.

- As you read on, though, what you slowly realize is that Mill's concern for **meaning** is actually a concern for **vitality**, for the "testing" of opinion "by personal experience" (46). As he says of most Christians, "whenever conduct is concerned, they look round for Mr. A and B to direct them how far to go in obeying Christ" (48). The doctrine has become just a "shell" or "husk" to such "believers," whose belief no longer motivates **action**.
- ***(3) and (4) are closely linked***. Opinions atrophy from disuse, both in thought ***and*** in action. A "dead dogma" is an opinion whose **lack of grounding** prevents it from **motivating behavior**.
- Also notice the connection between these two grounds and **Mill's perfectionism**: *the failure to challenge opinion hinders both our* ***intellectual growth*** *and our* ***capacity and desire to carry belief into action***. Mill's support for freedom of opinion is only *partly* about the pursuit of truth; it is also (and perhaps more importantly) about **development of human capacities for thought and action**.

NOT ON TEST!

Practical Applications:

*Is either **Truth** or **Development** promoted?*

- “Fighting words” (e.g., racial epithets, curses)
- Falsely shouting “fire” in a crowded theater
- Incitement to riot (**p. 62**; likely? imminent?)
- Defamation (private vs. “public” figures)
- Hate speech, understood as a kind of ***group libel:*** speech (spoken or written) that **argues** for the mental, physical, or ethical inferiority of members of certain historically-oppressed groups (e.g., blacks, women, Jews, and gays).

Individuality and Perfection

- Consistent with the Principle of Liberty, Mill contends that "men should be free to **act** upon their opinions—to carry these out in their lives," without harm to others (62).
- He goes on to say, famously, that "there should be different ***experiments of living***; that free scope should be given to ***varieties*** of character, short of injury to others; and that the worth of different modes of life should be ***proved practically*****,** when anyone thinks fit to try them" (63).
- As Chapter III's title suggests, though, is Mill's praise of "free development of individuality" and "individual spontaneity" *merely* about "well-being," i.e., hedonistic happiness (62)?
- Mill's **perfectionism** is the organizing theme for the entire chapter. Despite Mill's promise to make utility the "ultimate appeal on all ethical questions," his focus in this chapter is *solely* on the **development of human faculties.** Consider the following *three* passages in just the first few pages:

Individuality and Perfection, cont.

1. He speaks of men and women choosing a "**plan of life**" and says that "he who chooses his plan for himself, ***employs all his faculties***. He must use *observation* to see, *reasoning* and *judgment* to foresee, *activity* to gather materials for decision, *discrimination* to decide, and when he has decided, *firmness* and *self-control* to hold to his deliberate decision." (65; **develop capacities by *exercising* them**)
2. "It really is of importance, not only what men do, but also *what manner of men they are that do it.* Among the works of man, which human life is rightly employed in ***perfecting*** and ***beautifying***, the first in importance surely is *man himself*.... Human nature is not a *machine* to be built after a model, and set to do exactly the work prescribed for it, but a *tree*, which requires to ***grow*** and ***develop*** itself on all sides, according to the tendency of inward forces which make it a living thing." (66; **man: *work of art* & *evolving organism***; **1+2 = *bobo***)
3. "**If** it be any part of religion to believe that man was made by a good Being, it is more consistent with that faith to believe that *this Being gave all human faculties that they might be **cultivated** and **unfolded**,* not rooted out and consumed, and that he takes delight in *every nearer approach made by his creatures to the **ideal conception embodied in them**, every increase in any of their **capabilities** of comprehension, of action, or of enjoyment."* (69; **Parable of Talents**)

Individuality and Perfection, cont.

- As I've noted before, there is **strictly speaking** no contradiction between Mill's utilitarianism and his perfectionism: qualitative hedonism is consistent (just barely) with the *letter* of the former but embodies the *spirit* of the latter.
- What's fascinating about this chapter, though, is the way that the hedonistic *language* drops out almost entirely: Mill speaks here of *perfection*, **not** *pleasure*.
- This does make me wonder, **not** whether Mill's various commitments *fit* together—I believe they ultimately do, thanks to the way he *reshapes* them—but whether his hedonism is **superfluous**, as it appears to be in this chapter. Why doesn't he just make ***perfection*** his first principle? *(I can think of some answers….)*